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ABSTRACT

A review is provided of statewide and institutional data reflecting the magnitude and causes of the reverse transfer phenomenon. First, data from California, North Carolina, Illinois, Missouri, and Minnesota are presented, contrasting the numbers of students who transfer from two- to four-year colleges to the sometimes greater number of students transferring from four- to two-year colleges. Next, the digest reviews three research efforts undertaken by individual colleges to identify the characteristics and needs of reverse transfer students, including: (1) a study conducted at Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC), which focused on the demographic characteristics and reasons that students with certificates or degrees attend PVCC; (2) a study conducted at Santa Ana College (California) to determine the educational interests and matriculation patterns of students who had previously attended a four-year institution; and (3) research undertaken at the Los Rios Community College District (California), which compared the characteristics and objectives of students with five different educational backgrounds. Finally, the digest offers conclusions about reverse transfers, indicating that: (1) those holding four-year degrees represent one of the most academically able segments of the community college student body; (2) those without a baccalaureate come to the community college for a variety of reasons, only one of which is academic difficulty at the senior institution; and (3) while reverse transfers constitute only a minority of the community college population, their presence is further evidence of the growing complexity of the community college environment. (EJV)

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COUNTING THE REVERSE TRANSFER STUDENTS



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COUNTING THE REVERSE TRANSFER STUDENTS

While thousands of students transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities, large numbers transfer from senior institutions to community colleges. An examination of available statewide data, for example, reveals the following:

- In California, 35,600 students transferred during Fall 1983 from community colleges to the University of California (UC) and to the California State University System (CSU). At the same time, however, 38,400 students transferred to the community colleges from UC and CSU (McIntyre, 1984).
- During Fall 1983, 3,182 students transferred from North Carolina public two-year colleges to the state's public and private senior institutions. On the other hand, 5,216 students transferred from these senior institutions to the two-year colleges. 92 percent of these reverse transfers entered vocational programs (Balfour, 1984).
- Illinois data indicate that 14,000 students transferred from community colleges to senior institutions in the state during Fall 1983. 6,220 students, however, transferred from the senior institutions to the community colleges. (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 1984).
- In Fall 1979, 3,499 students in Missouri public community colleges transferred to public and private senior institutions in the state. On the other hand, 1,622 students from the senior institutions transferred to the community colleges. Of all the students who transfer out of Missouri's state universities, the largest proportion enter community colleges. (Missouri State Coordinating Board for Higher Education, 1983).
- During 1979-80, 3,409 students transferred from Minnesota community colleges and technical institutes to senior institutions in the state. During the same time period, 4,375 students transferred from four-year colleges and universities to the state's two-year institutions; 38% of these reverse transfers entered area vocational-technical institutes (Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1982).

Though the data vary from state to state, they leave no doubt that a significant proportion of two-year college students have prior experience at four-year colleges and universities. But these aggregate figures leave unanswered questions. Why do these students transfer to the community colleges? What proportion already has a bachelor's degree? Are the community colleges meeting their needs?

This ERIC Digest briefly reviews three research efforts undertaken by individual colleges to identify the characteristics and needs of reverse transfer students. Methodologies, findings, and implications will be summarized.

REVERSE TRANSFERS AT PIEDMONT VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

In Fall 1981 a study was conducted to investigate the reverse transfer phenomenon at Piedmont Virginia Community College. The study sought to determine (1) the proportion of PVCC students who had already obtained a certificate, or an associate, bachelor's or graduate degree; (2) the demographic characteristics of these certificate or degree holders; (3) their reasons for attending PVCC as compared to the reasons given by non-degree holders; and (4) differences between degree holders and non-degree holders enrolled in programs associated with high employability. Questionnaires were administered to a random sample of students in Fall 1981 class sections and to students in all sections in selected vocational programs.

Major findings reveal that about 13 percent of the responding students already held a bachelor's degree or higher. These reverse transfer students were more interested in obtaining marketable job skills than were the students who had earned only a high school diploma. In addition, students with a bachelor's degree or higher were disproportionately represented in vocational programs. These students comprised 53 percent of the enrollments in the respiratory therapy program; 27 percent of enrollments in nursing; 29 percent of enrollments in advanced data processing; and 19 percent of enrollment in accounting. For the complete study report, see Ross, 1982.

THE REVERSE TRANSFER STUDY AT SANTA ANA COLLEGE (CA)

The Santa Ana College study focused on all students who had previously attended a four-year institution. After a preliminary analysis revealed that these reverse transfers made up approximately 21 percent of all credit students in attendance, a further study was conducted to determine their educational interests and matriculation patterns. A sample of 360 reverse transfer students was selected for interviews.

Selected findings reveal that 97 of the interviewees left their four-year institutions after having completed a degree (presumably the baccalaureate). Of these 97 students, 49 enrolled in the community college to boost their occupational skills, 30 enrolled for personal interest, 12 enrolled in remedial courses, and six enrolled to prepare for transfer to a senior institution. Thus, of those reverse transfer with a baccalaureate, most were enrolled for occupational upgrading or personal interest. Of those reverse transfers without a baccalaureate, large proportions were also enrolled for occupational upgrading and personal interest (43 percent and 22 percent respectively); but another 53 percent enrolled to prepare for transfer back to the senior institution.

The researchers at Santa Ana College also asked respondents why they left the senior institution. The responses were varied. Most (41 percent)

indicated that they left because they had completed the degree they were working towards. Other reasons cited (in descending order of frequency) were "moved," "too expensive/no financial aid," "employment conflict," "changed goals," "academic difficulty," "family needs," "learned all I needed to learn," "illness," and "needed a break." In addition, 11 percent were attending the community college and a four-year college simultaneously. Thus, reverse transfers come to the community college for a variety of personal and academic reasons. For the complete text of the Santa Ana study, see Slark, 1982.

REVERSE TRANSFERS AT THE LOS RIOS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT (CA)

Researchers at the Los Rios Community College District surveyed a sample of 10,196 credit students to compare the characteristics and objectives of students with five different educational backgrounds:

- first-time college students (54.7% of the sample).
- noncompleter lateral transfers: those who transferred from another two-year college without having completed a two-year program (19.2%).
- completer lateral transfer: those who transferred from another two-year college after having completed a two-year program (7.5%).
- noncompleter reverse transfers: those who transferred from a four-year institution without a bachelor's degree (12%).
- completer reverse transfers: those who transferred from a four-year institution after earning a bachelor's degree or higher (7.6%).

Not surprisingly, analysis of the findings reveals that the most significant differences between the five groups emerged between the first-time students and the "completer reverse transfers." The latter were older, more likely to be married, and more likely to be employed and self-supporting. In addition, the first-time students had the lowest grade point average, while the reverse transfers with bachelor's degrees had the highest. Only smaller (and in many cases insignificant) differences emerged in comparing the first-time college students, the students who had transferred from other two-year colleges, and the reverse transfers who had not earned a baccalaureate. Thus, students who come to the community college after earning a baccalaureate are quite different than the student population at large. The complete study report can be found in Mitchell, 1984.

SUMMARY

The above studies provide insights into the complexity of the reverse transfer phenomenon. These are summarized below:

- broadly speaking, there are two types of reverse transfers: those with a baccalaureate and those without a baccalaureate. While large percentages of both groups attend for occupational training or personal interest, a

significant percentage of the latter group attend with the intent of returning to a senior institution.

—As a group, reverse transfers with a baccalaureate represent one of the most academically able segments of the community college student body. The data from Piedmont Virginia Community College suggest that these students may be disproportionately represented in vocational programs that have comparatively stiff prerequisites.

—Reverse transfers without a baccalaureate come to the community college for a variety of reasons, only one of which is academic difficulty at the senior institution. Some return because of financial, family, or employment problems.

It should be stressed that reverse transfers constitute only a minority of the community college student population. The colleges' main clientele continues to be those students who have never attended college before. Yet the growing evidence of sizable numbers of reverse transfers — particularly those who have already earned a baccalaureate — is further confirmation of the complexity of the community college environment, both in terms of the types of students served and the educational objectives they are pursuing.

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